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A MONTHLY LETTER ABOUT EVANGELISM

LETTRE MENSUELLE SUR L'ÉVANGÉLISATION

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EVANGELISM IN SOUTH INDIAN VILLAGES

It is four o'clock in the afternoon. The village in the Rayalaseema area of South India is quiet, most of the able-bodied men and women being at work in the fields. A few old people sit and gossip under a tree or lie asleep on their rope beds in the shade of their houses. The mothers of tiny babies are already pounding grain in preparation for the evening meal, and from the tiny one-roomed school-cum-Church building in the centre of the Christians' houses comes a babble of voices as two teachers attempt to teach five classes of children ranging from five to eleven years of age. The voices of the children as they learn aloud their alphabet, their multiplication tables, some morality verses and other contents of their few tattered text books, are echoed by the voices of other children who have never been submitted to this discipline but who have been given the responsibility of looking after younger brothers and sisters while their parents are out in the fields, or of gathering twigs or cattle manure for fuel, or minding the goats, buffaloes and cows that wander in search of pasture in the surrounding fields.

A bullock cart comes in sight, raising a cloud of dust. It is seen by the children and as it comes closer they run shouting to greet the woman missionary, the Indian Biblewoman and her untrained Companion and the young widow on probation for Biblewomen's training who clamber out of the cart and stretch their aching limbs after journeying all day first in a very ancient bus and then the last few miles by bullock cart. The shouts of the children bring the teachers out of the school and they greet the travellers, while eager hands sieze the strange assortment of bedding, camp cots, book box, food sack, flannelgraph board, lamps and medicine case that accompanies them and carry them into the school building. The new arrivals are taken to the teacher's house and his wife (who is assistant teacher) leaves her post to fetch them brass vessels full of refreshing water to wash their faces, hands and feet, and she then prepares sweet, hot coffee to revive them after the journey.

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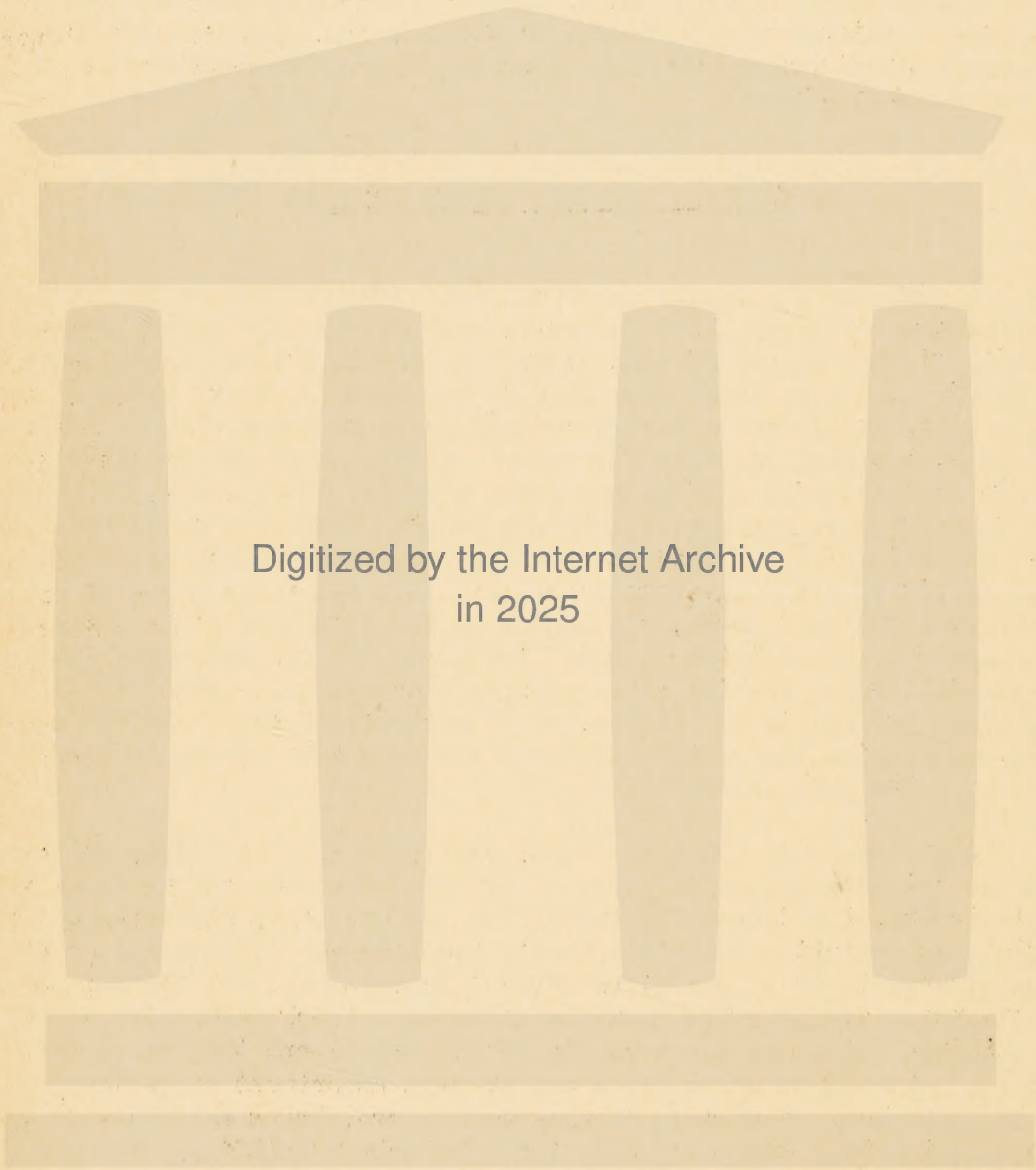

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After exchange of news the women go into the school building at five o'clock when school is over and teach the children an action song and then a Bible story illustrated with flannelgraph pictures. The Hindu children who have attended the school all day stay and take part in this and also in the games which follows in the street outside afterwards. Gradually the mothers and fathers of the children return from the fields, carrying on their heads large bundles of grass for their buffaloes or of wood for fuel. They pause awhile to watch their children at play and to shout encouragement or advice to them. Then the herds of buffaloes, cows and goats come back from their meagre pasture, raising clouds of dust and making further play impossible. Tired bulls, who have worked all day in the fields, return to the houses they share with their owners, the bells round their necks tinkling cheerfully.

The Biblewomen now visit all the Christian houses. These were formerly the outcaste quarters and lie outside the main village. Many of the houses are built only of mud and thatch. They are easily erected and even more easily destroyed if fire sweeps the village in the hot weather. A few families have better houses built of local stone, with flat roofs and no windows. The Biblewomen greet each family in turn, asking after those who were sick when they last came to the village four of five months previously, making suitable comments when they are proudly shown the babies who have been born since then, and calling all the women to come to a meeting after the evening meal is over.

As darkness falls tiny oil lamps are lit in the houses and the Church bell (a length of railway line !) is rung and the teacher conducts evening prayers for the small group of adults and the large group of children who come. Most of the women are busy pounding grain and preparing evening food for their families. Some of the men are feeding their cattle or drawing water from the well. Others sit on the raised stone platform under a tree in the centre of the village and smoke cheap tobacco twists and talk over the events of the day.

After eating the rice and curry meal they have brought with them the Biblewomen ring the Church bell again and gradually the women gather. Many of them bring a baby on their hips and put it to sleep on the floor in front of them. After working all day in the fields the rather stuffy atmosphere and the dim lighting in the Church make them feel very sleepy. A few unashamedly give up the struggle and lean against the wall and sleep. But most manage to keep themselves awake by joining in the singing of familiar well-loved songs and then learning a new song. This is followed by prayer and then a lesson about the Christian faith, Christian family life or the objects of the Women's Fellowship of the Church of South India, into which the women are to be received after some more teaching. The talk is illustrated with flat pictures or flannelgraph, rather inadequately illuminated by hurrican lanterns. Half way through the talk a group of Hindu women arrive. Place is made for them and they sit separate from the others. The Biblewoman adjusts her talk to meet their needs.

As the women stream out of the Church after the meeting the air is cool and fresh outside and there is a lovely clear moonlit sky. Someone asks for some dancing and the request is taken up by many others, so the women form themselves into a circle and to the accompaniment of a Christian song

sung by the Biblewoman and repeated by everyone, they do one of their traditional village dances with hand-clapping and rhythmic stamping of the feet. The Hindu women sit and watch and listen.

The Biblewomen have come to stay in the village for a week and during that time they will visit the Christian homes every day and try to give personal help and teaching to each family. They will sell Bibles, New Testaments, Gospels, hymn books and other Christian literature to the Christians, to the Hindu children who attend the school and to the Hindus whose homes they visit and to whom they preach the Gospel. People will come and ask for medical help and they will give what aid they can and use that also as an opportunity to tell about Jesus, the Great Physician. Every day they will teach the children and the women and probably on Sunday the teacher will ask them to conduct worship for the whole congregation. They will remind the Christian women of a three day Summer School to be run for them and other women in the area during the hot weather when there is no field work. They forwarn them that they will be coming to collect offerings of grain for this. The women are enthusiastic and promise to give grain and some say that they will walk the seven miles to the village where the Summer School has been arranged, so that they may enjoy the fellowship, teaching, worship and fun together with women from other villages. So the week passes and it is time for the Biblewomen to move on to another village. The Christian women say Good-bye with real regret. Over the two or three years they have been visiting the village a real friendship has been established between them and they look forward to the Biblewomen's visits.

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Is it evangelism ? I have been doing this sort of work now for six years and I believe that it is a very valuable and effective way of proclaiming the Gospel. In some villages regular visits of this sort have resulted in the emergence of a strong group of women with a real experience of Christ and sufficient understanding of their faith and power of expression to enable them to witness to the Hindu women who work beside them in the fields. Some have been called to pray and sing in the homes of Hindus and Muslims where there has been sickness, or distress in childbirth. Some have gone further afield and visited other villages, playing their simple instruments, singing their songs and telling in their own way what Christ means to them.

In other villages even after three or four years of regular visiting the women remain ignorant, backward and lethargic and still very much influenced by Hinduism. But even in such places there are usually two or three women who are shining examples of Christian faith and love, who grieve over the lifelessness of the Church and who do their best to influence those around them. Or there may be one family which is prepared to suffer starvation rather than join in the illicit distilling and selling of toddy which is the chief income of many other families. Here and there a few women and men are being selected and sent for lay leaders training. They return to bring fresh life to the village Churches and to be leaders in worship and evangelism. Grants from overseas are being cut. The schools are being handed over to Government and many teachers will cease to help in the Church. But the work of evangelism will be carried on by such as these. They are very poor. They are often quite illiterate. But they are "the salt of the earth".